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Imagination and Fancy (1)

If we ask of something, a rainbow for instance, the question: What is it?, we may mean one of two very different things. We may be asking simply: How is it identified? How do I know when I am in the presence of this thing as distinct from other things more or less like it? In the actual case of an appearance as easily identified as a rainbow that is perhaps unlikely to be a problem. But in many cases it is. A man who has many times observed a diffused glow in the sky may enquire: What exactly is the Aurora Borealis? because he suspects that sometimes that is what he has seen, while at other times it was merely the day's after-glow or the lights of a distant city reflected from the clouds. He suspects moreover that his inability to distinguish shows there are things about the Aurora Borealis which he has been too careless to notice. And he is right.

On the other hand the question may mean, not, how is a rainbow to be identified when it appears? but, of what nature is a rainbow? And this question again may be subdivided into two questions. We may be asking: How is it brought about? or we may be asking: what is its ontological status? Where does it stand in terms of such categories as real and unreal, mental and physical, natural and supernatural, human and non-human? These three questions are closely connected. The second is normally preceded by the first and the third arises out of the second. Thus, in the case of the rainbow, three possible answers, based respectively on Newton's optics, on Goethe's theory of colour and on the Book of Genesis, are all of them answers to the second question which many would regard as being at the same time the only possible answer to the third. The fact remains however that they are three different and clearly distinguishable questions.

One peculiar feature about the mind of Samuel Taylor Coleridge is that the question: What is imagination? appears to have assailed

him simultaneously, and upon a sharp encounter, in all of its three different senses. He was critic, poet and philosopher—in that order, not because that is the order of their importance or of his abilities, but because in any contemporary enquiry that is the natural order in which the three questions occur.

He himself has told us how he encountered the first question while he was still at school. His schoolmaster, the Rev. James Boyer,* used to point out to his pupils that "Poetry, even that of the loftiest and, seemingly, that of the wildest odes, had a *logic of its own,* as severe as that of science." [1] He was to spend much of his later life justifying, in depth, the four words we have italicized; but it is clear that Bowyer was mainly concerned with training his pupils to *recognize* genuinely "poetic" language and to distinguish it ostensively from its spurious imitations. Probably it was only a good deal later that Coleridge associated this distinction with the word *imagination;* but poetic utterance, as he already felt, and later understood it, *is* imagination appearing, as surely as the coloured arch in the sky is a rainbow appearing. The question: Is this a rainbow or not? is the same question, whether we use the word *rainbow* or some other word.

Among young men with any love of literature, and particularly of poetry, these exercises in identification go on almost of their own accord and are one of the principal delights of friendship. We know how Coleridge saw, or thought he saw (later he was a good deal less certain) the rainbow of imagination in Bowles's sonnets and the eagerness with which he sought to share his discovery. His correspondence for a few years from about 1796, particularly perhaps with Charles Lamb and Robert Southey, is full of similar literary exchanges. Lamb, with his delicate literary taste and literary gusto but without any marked desire to proceed from the first question to the other two,[2] was surely an ideal friend for this purpose. The term *exercises* is of course misleading. It may be quite proper for a biographer to see them in that light, in retrospect, but the experience at the time is more like that of sheer high spirits. Your friends are reading poetry—and trying to write it. You are reading poetry—and trying to write it. You delight in your friends and they in you. You are all young and all things are still possible. It is glory beyond all glory, but it is also a private joke

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* Coleridge refers to him as "Bowyer."

between you. It is the halcyon time when you post off the latest effusion with an intentionally idiotic doggerel note beginning:

> In stale blank verse a subject stale
> I send *per post* my *Nightingale;*
> And like an honest bard, dear Wordsworth,
> You'll tell me what you think, my Bird's worth . . .[3]

and, when you are not exchanging verses of your own, you are arguing about the merits of accepted classics, such as Gray's *Elegy,* or contending "with unfeigned zeal for the honour of a favourite contemporary." [4]

In this way, in the sometimes easy-going and sometimes strenuous exchanges of literary friendship, the first question merges inevitably into the second. It would be the same with rainbows if, besides identifying them, men could create them. In Coleridge's case it was through his friendship with Wordsworth, above all others, that he encountered the second question: How does imagination come about? It would almost be truer to say that it encountered *him.*[5] It is a moving experience to contemplate, in the pages of the *Biographia Literaria* and in Coleridge's correspondence throughout his life, his unfaltering admiration, if not adoration, of Wordsworth's genius and his love of the man. But this book is not a biography; still less is it a history of English literature; and it is not within its purview to show how Coleridge's encounter with that other genius was a major formative influence in his life, or how the contact between the genius of Wordsworth and the genius of Coleridge himself (perhaps, in spite of the adoration, the greater of the two) set up reverberations which have continued ever since, and have largely determined the course not only of "Romantic" but largely also of anti-Romantic literature and poetic theory.

We have introduced the word *genius* and, in doing so, have reached and passed the boundary, such as it is, between the second question and the third: the ontological status of imagination. But it would be a mistake, as already indicated, to imagine that this was the point in Coleridge's life at which he himself first advanced to a consideration of the third question. The ontological status of imagination turns on the relation between the mind of man and his environment; particularly on the relation between mind on the one hand and nature on the

other; and this was a matter with which Coleridge's own mind had begun concerning itself at a very early age indeed. "He was a metaphysician," writes Shawcross, "long before he studied the German philosophers . . ."[6] And one may add: "and long before he began to ponder what his contemporaries called *imagination* or *fancy*." Lamb's vignette of "the inspired charity boy" unfolding in the cloisters of Christ's Hospital "the mysteries of Iamblichus and Plotinus," is too well known to require citation.[7]

If that may be suspected of exaggeration, we have Coleridge's own word for his "early study of Plato and Plotinus, with the commentaries and the *Theologia Platonica* of the illustrious Florentine [Marsilio Ficino]."[8] In other words, before he was out of his 'teens he was familiar with a view of the relation between mind and nature, to which the mental habit of tacitly presupposing the Cartesian duality presented no problem, since it had not been collectively acquired, when that view was formed. Arrived at Cambridge, he went on to read Jakob Böhme, whose seminal influence on German philosophy and indeed on Western thought in general, is becoming increasingly, but is perhaps still inadequately, appreciated.[9] He was a free man, so to speak, of that philosophical and theosophical stream of thought which has not ceased to irrigate the culture of the West, and in particular its literature, art and theory of art, since it first began to flow, though it has percolated underground for much longer periods than those during which it has watered the surface.[10] He had already absorbed a Neo-platonic and hermetic philosophy of "beauty" before he began to think about "imagination"; and it was upon a mind so predisposed and shaped and stored, as well as on a tremulously delicate sensibility, that the beauties of nature and of poetry opened themselves afresh in early manhood. And it was with a mind so shaped, disposed and stored, and after that opening and the *annus mirabilis* in his own career as a poet to which it led, that he travelled to Germany and began his study of German philosophy.

All this is reflected in that tantalising, and certainly unsatisfactory, product of genius, the *Biographia Literaria*. The reminiscences in the early chapters concerning, for instance, his excitement over the appearance of Bowles's sonnets, reflect his encounter with the first of the three questions: How do I identify imagination, when I see it? So also does his account in Chapter IV of the appearance of Wordsworth's *Descriptive Sketches* in 1793, when he himself was still at Cambridge;

but it is noticeable that this is immediately followed by a remark on "the poetic Psyche, in its process to full development . . . ," and it is this remark, not the *Descriptive Sketches,* that leads in to "the sudden effect" produced on his mind a few years later by hearing Wordsworth recite a manuscript poem.[11] The whole of the Wordsworth *motif,* from its first appearance in Chapter IV to its culmination in the memorable nine chapters (XIV–XXII) analysing, criticising and praising Wordsworth's poetry, are saturated with Coleridge's response to the second question: How does imagination work? But it is not perhaps surprising that, in dealing with Wordsworth's poetry in critical detail, his mind sometimes harks back to the old days and the first question. Thus, there is force in some of the objections that have been raised against these chapters; Coleridge, it is said, does not always apply his own principles[12] and even echoes those Aristotelian and Johnsonian categories with which he must have been familiar when the *Descriptive Sketches* first attracted his attention. It has also been observed that some of the particular examples he selects of Wordsworth's excellence are not those we should have chosen ourselves. In such cases it is probable that he was remembering the shock of his first youthful encounter with the passage he quotes—into which all sorts of accidents no doubt entered. The "manuscript poem" already referred to[13] is not one many of us would choose for the purpose of emphasising Wordsworth's pre-eminence in what Coleridge means by "imagination." No. But, as a matter of history, it happens to have been that particular poem that lit the spark in his friend. It happens to have been that one that goaded Coleridge from the first question on to the second and, through that, to the third.

We have seen that his was a mind acutely aware of its own *activity;* and it is precisely out of such an awareness that the philosophical problem of "beauty" turns readily into the psychological and philosophical problem of "imagination." It is this problem that forms the central substance of the *Biographia Literaria* as it stands. It may well be that, had Chapter XIII ever been written, the intellectual emphasis would have rested finally on poetic rather than "philosophic" imagination. As it is, however, systematic argument is abandoned before that point is reached. Chapter XII is concerned almost exclusively with the philosophic imagination,[14] and above all (as we have seen) with establishing its ontological status. But its last paragraph begins: "I shall now proceed to the nature and genesis of the imagination," and it is fairly

clear that Chapter XIII was to have dealt with the psychology (the second of our three questions), rather than the philosophy, of imagination and in that way to lead over from philosophy to poetry. It would also, presumably, have made clearer the distinction between the two aspects, and thus the two uses of the word *imagination,* which, as it is, we are left to infer as best we can from occasional hints, such as the remark in Chapter VII, to which we shall be returning:

> In philosophical language, we must denominate this intermediate faculty in all its degrees and determinations, the IMAGINATION. But, in common language, and especially on the subject of poetry, we appropriate the name to a superior degree of the faculty, joined to a superior voluntary control over it.[15]

If we confine the word to this latter sense, Professor Appleyard is justified in saying that "Coleridge promised to deduce the imagination, but he never did so." [16] It is certainly true that he never did so in the *Biographia Literaria,* because he never wrote Chapter XIII. But that is not to say that we cannot deduce it ourselves from what there is of Chapter XIII, taken with the rest of the book and the rest of Coleridge's work.

With the first and longest part of Chapter XIII we have already dealt at some length. If now we look again at the concluding paragraphs, giving, as Coleridge says, "the main result of the Chapter," we find they comprise, firstly, the well-known distinction between primary and secondary imagination.

> The IMAGINATION then, I consider either as primary, or secondary. The primary IMAGINATION I hold to be the living Power and prime Agent of all human Perception, and as a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM. The secondary Imagination I consider as an echo of the former, co-existing with the conscious will, yet still as identical with the former in the *kind* of its agency, and differing only in *degree,* and in the *mode* of its operation. It dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to re-create; or where this process is rendered impossible, yet still at all events it struggles to idealize and to unify. It is essentially *vital,* even as all objects (*as* objects) are essentially fixed and dead.[17]

And, secondly, the equally well-known distinction between both of these on the one hand and fancy on the other:

> Fancy, on the contrary, has no other counters to play with, but fixities and definites. The Fancy is indeed no other than a mode of Memory emancipated from the order of time and space; while it is blended with, and modified by that empirical phenomenon of the will, which we express by the word Choice. But equally with the ordinary memory the Fancy must receive all its materials ready made from the law of association.

The following chapter is devoted to considering each of these paragraphs in turn.